

BLENHEIM.

WEDNESDAY, 12TH MARCH, 1919.

ALEXANDER THOMSON, Lime-works, Flaxbourne, examined.

I have been asked to come here and put before the Committee the position regarding the production of agricultural lime in this district. Just prior to the war the farmers considered that they needed lime on some of their lands, and I was approached about commencing to work a deposit of lime on my property. About that time soft lime was discovered at Waikare, I believe, and in looking round we found that there seemed to be considerable quantities of it on our own place. I commenced to work on this soft lime in 1914. I worked for about fourteen months—until owing to men leaving for the front labour became scarce—and I closed down, and at the present time we are not working. I want to be in a position to commence again when times become normal, which I hope will not be long; but I can see that we will not be able to continue using soft carbonate of lime as we have been doing by simply taking it from the hill and screening it. These deposits are not as extensive as they seemed; but I have sufficient for another six months, and then it becomes a question of putting in machinery and starting in a proper way. I am convinced that there will be a fair demand here for lime as soon as we get back to normal conditions—in fact, there is now. The position I am in is this: that I have to cart the lime to the railway-station along a road that is not properly formed, and across two creeks which in times of flood are difficult to cross—so difficult as to stop us for a few days at a time. In order to assist in the production of lime, I suggest that the road to the railway-station at Ward should be put in order (including two bridges), and be maintained by the Government through the Awatere County Council, as that body has considered it unfair that it should maintain the road when damaged by lime-carting for use in other districts. Owing to the difficulty in finding a plant which will satisfactorily crush limestone in its raw state, I ask that the Government should find out and install a suitable plant capable of turning out, say, 12 tons per day. This I shall be quite willing to pay for when it proves satisfactory so far as its work is concerned. I also desire that the Government give assistance and advice in laying out the quarry and works. In the event of a drying plant proving necessary I urge that a supply of coal at a cheap rate should be arranged. The cost when produced should not exceed £1 per ton on the trucks, and I have found it difficult to produce at this price when selling carbonate of lime in a soft state, and of this material the supply is limited. I would also suggest that steamer conveyance to such districts as the Sounds should be subsidized to encourage the use of lime. I suggest that trials of the lime be made in growing tests of different crops in the district—with and without lime. Scarcity of labour at present is the main difficulty, and when machinery is installed it may be necessary to provide accommodation for the workers. The carbonate of lime supplied in the district has given satisfaction, but in order to continue the industry it will be absolutely necessary to crush the rock; and any assistance in obtaining a plant and in other respects as suggested will give some encouragement to make the larger financial outlay.

To Mr. Craigie: The length of the road is about a mile and a half. The road has been formed; it is merely a question of metalling. I should say, roughly, that it would cost about £300 to put it in order.

To Mr. Sidey: There is an unlimited quantity of hard lime rock on my property.

To the Chairman: The price on the rail is 15s. a ton. When I referred to the machine I meant the power to drive it also. If the plant proved successful I would be prepared to pay off the cost within a reasonable time.

J. W. HUMPHREYS examined.

What I have to say concerns a matter of very great importance at the present time—I refer to the price of coal. When the Government purchased the State coal-mines it was done with the view of bringing down the price of coal.

The Chairman: Has it not done so?—Very slightly, if at all. It struck me at the time that State coal-mines without State ships to carry the coal was simply a farce, and I have thought so ever since. It seems to me that at the present time the State is simply providing coal for the purpose of giving big dividends to the Union Steamship Company and other companies. The bulk of the profit that should go to the State goes in the matter of freights. We are told that the miner is not making such a big thing out of it. The consumer is paying considerably for his coal. The leakage must be through the freights. I think that the remedy is that the State should have a naval fleet and mercantile vessels and colliers—ships capable of looking after the lighthouses, and also ferry-boats. There is no doubt the ferry-boats should connect with the railways. The Great Eastern Railway Company in England runs its own ships. The naval mercantile fleet should be run on the same lines as the British Navy—that is, men should be enlisted at a certain rate of pay and under fixed conditions of living and pensions. If these things were in existence it would do away with the trouble we have with sailors and firemen. The Government rate of wages, conditions, and pensions could be taken as a criterion and be made the minimum conditions for private companies. In any case, I understand that private companies could be forced to introduce a system of pensions or a superannuation fund. The only thing that will bring down the price of coal is to establish State-owned ships.

To the Chairman: We have not got a State coal-depot in Blenheim.

J. PERANO, Te Awaite Whaling-station, Tory Channel, examined.

We are asking the Government to issue a license to all whalers, and all whaling-factories not to be less than a hundred miles apart—the same as obtains in other parts of the world. We